

Selling Miss Minerva

Ten Stories

by Earl Derr Biggers, 1884-1933

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BILLY ANDERSON was an automobile salesman. He had a method all his own. It was much the same method the ancient minstrels must have used in peddling poetry. It involved little mention of differential, transmission and other grimy points about a car. Instead it was all mixed up with the everlasting stars, the pounding surf, the misty mountain tops. Romance adapted to business, Anderson called it.

His environment, being Southern California, helped a lot. The climate played a gentle accompaniment to his fervid story. There is something in the air of that

wonderful state, no doubt of it—a mild, soothing influence that makes poets of retired wholesale grocers. Hard-boiled widowers from Iowa farms come out to spend a pleasant winter—and not a cent more than they can help. They end by marrying again at the age of seventy—and hang the expense!

Anderson foraged up and down and in and out of the big tourist hotels, interviewing prospects. The psychology of salesmanship was his middle name. He sized each prospect up. Nine out of ten, having shut their roll-top desks far to the east, were ripe for the romance talk. That was the talk they got.

On a warm and sunny morning late in January, Billy Anderson sat on the veranda of the Maryland Hotel, in Pasadena, opposite Mr. Henry G. Firkins, of Boston. Mr. Firkins was rumored to be a prospect. He looked like a good one.

“Now, if I was trying to sell you a Requa car in your home town back East,” Billy was saying, “I’d probably use another method. But this—this is California, and buying a car in California is different from buying one anywhere else. Do you know what the difference is?”

“Well, it’s a long haul,” said Mr. Firkins. “I suppose I’d have to pay more freight.”

“No, no!” protested Billy. “It’s not a question of freight. It’s a question of—romance.”

“Romance?”

“You’ve said it! Romance! Mr. Firkins, what man or woman in this workaday world is too worn with care and worry not to be able on occasion to succumb to its thrill—its glamour?”

“I don’t know. Name one.”

“I can’t! And let me tell you, you don’t have to open the covers of a magazine to meet up with it—not for a minute. There’s plenty of romance everywhere, even in the everyday business of selling automobiles. Provided, of course, you look for it.”

“Son,” said Mr. Firkins, “I don’t get you.”

“What I mean is this,” smiled Billy Anderson: “When I sell a man a Requa car out here in California, I sell him not merely a perfect piece of mechanism; I sell him revel and all the romance that goes with it. I sell him thousands of miles of smooth California roads; the roar of angry surf on the rocks below Monterey; the cool silent depths of Topanga Canon; the crumbling, eloquent walls of San Juan Capistrano. I sell him the hush of a great redwood forest; valleys green with alfalfa fields; the sharp airs and vast panoramas of Sierra summits. Do you get me now?”

“I think I do,” admitted Mr. Firkins.

“I want to show it to you, with all its allure and invitation,” Billy warmed up. “I want to create a picture, not of a wonder-full piece of mechanism but of all the ownership of that piece of mechanism will procure for you out here in God’s country.”

He stopped, for Mr. Firkins was staring at him coldly, appraisingly. Could he have made a mistake in his man? On rare occasions that happened. Certainly there was little answering gleam in the Firkins eye. Billy Anderson started in on another tack—regretfully. His was never the soul of a mechanic.

“Of course, I don’t want you to think I’m neglecting the other side of it,” he said. “From a mechanical standpoint, the Requa is a masterpiece. I’m sort of taking it for granted you know that”

"I ought to know it," answered Mr. Firkins surprisingly. "I've had the Boston agency for the Requa the past fifteen years, and I sell it in a number of small Massachusetts towns as well."

Billy Anderson deflated rapidly.

"I didn't know that," he said limply. "It makes me look rather foolish. We'll be glad to fix you up with a car while you're out here. Can I make a date for you with the boss? And I'm sorry if I've wasted your time."

He stood up.

"Wait a minute," Mr. Firkins said. "Sit down. You haven't wasted anybody's time. Tell me, how long have you been handing people out the line of talk that you just gave me?"

"Oh, about three years."

"Does it work?"

"Nearly always. Women have a lot to say about the selection of the family car—and that talk gets them. The men I go up against are here to relax—to have a good time—yes, I generally hook them too. There was only one man in the state of California sold more Requas than I did last year," he added proudly.

"U'm!" Mr. Firkins frowned. "You admit, then, that it's pretty easy?"

"Like selling candy to an infant."

"Yes? Well, we never get anywhere in this world along the easy route. Aren't you about ready to tackle something more difficult?"

"You mean—"

"From what part of the States do you come?"

"I'm going to surprise you," laughed Billy Anderson. "I was born right here in Pasadena, twenty-three years ago. Yes, sir—a native son. Examine me closely. You may never meet another."

"Ever been East?"

"Yes: but I didn't like it."

"What part of the East did you visit?"

"Denver," said Billy Anderson seriously. Mr. Firkins smiled.

"How would you like to come to Boston and work for me?"

"Boston!" repeated Billy Anderson. "I get a shiver down my spine. And I see snow—big piles of it."

"You're psychic," said Firkins. "I admit the snow. But I'll make it worth your while. And a young man like you ought to strike out and see the world."

"I've felt that way at times," Billy admitted. "I did try Honolulu. Easy, too—selling cars. But not so easy to get them over after you've sold them. The steamship company has a nasty habit of leaving your consignment on the San Francisco pier."

"Nothing like that in Boston," suggested Mr. Firkins.

"I know—but quite aside from the climate, isn't Boston a bit chilly? I mean, wouldn't my wild free manner sort of scare 'em to death?"

"That," smiled Mr. Firkins, "is exactly my idea. We're too conservative out there. I want to get things stirring, bring in new blood."

"You want me to jazz up the Boston trade?"

"You've—er—said it," Firkins replied. "I'll be going back in about six weeks—suppose you go with me. I don't know what you're getting here, but I'll start you at five thousand. What do you say?"

"It has an appealing sound to it," Billy admitted. "And I am in a rut here, I know. Yes, I'll take you."

"Good! Give us a trial at any rate. If you don't like it—well, California will still be standing."

"Till the sands of the desert grow cold'—and then some!"

SIX weeks later Billy Anderson called on Mr. Firkins for his final instruction. He was full of enthusiasm for the task that lay ahead. Mr. Firkins announced that he was returning by way of Canada, but that he wanted Billy to go East by the direct route.

"My boy," he said rather sheepishly, "I'm going to start in by playing a mean trick on you."

"Yes? Go ahead."

"There's only one of my agencies that has never made good. Before you come to Boston I'm going to ask you to stop off there and try your hand for a few months. Did you ever hear of Stonefield, Massachusetts?"

"Never! What sort of a place is it?"

"It's a city in the Berkshire Hills, and it's two sorts of a place: On one side of the main street, a hustling factory town; and on the other, a group of ancient Brahmans still fighting the Civil War. Anything modern they regard as a slap in the face. They still ride about in carriages drawn by an almost extinct creature called the horse."

"I don't believe it," said Billy. "Not in this day and age."

"You will believe it—when you see Stonefield. It's the toughest job in your line in America. I'm ashamed of myself, but I'm going to ask you to tackle it. The leader of the codfish aristocracy is an old friend of mine—Miss Minerva Bluebottle. I believe she came to Massachusetts on the Mayflower—or it may have been her great-grandparents."

"You want me to sell Miss Bluebottle on the Requa?"

"I want you to try it. The rest of them follow her like sheep. Get her into one of our cars, and you'll sell forty more. But—don't be optimistic. I don't believe it can be done."

"Oh, I don't know."

"I do. And here's a tip: Don't be too generous with large talk about California."

"Why not?" Mr. Anderson was thunderstruck.

"Because, though there are many places where a California booster doesn't make much of a hit, I don't know of any spot where his talk will fall flatter than in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. The people there don't do any vulgar boasting, of course; but they happen to know that God spent the whole seven days making their corner of the world—and left the rest of the job to novices."

"Some one ought to tell 'em different," suggested Billy.

"They're pretty deaf," smiled Firkins. "I'll give you a letter to Miss Minerva. If you can sell her you're the wonder of the age."

"I'll sell her," announced Billy firmly.

"I wonder," mused Mr. Firkins. "It'll be worth watching anyhow. Out here you're regarded as irresistible. I know myself that Minerva Bluebottle is immovable. When an irresistible force meets an immovable body, what happens then?"

"The cross," smiled Billy Anderson, "will mark the spot where the immovable body once stood."

BILLY ANDERSON landed in Stonefield early one April morning. April—in California! A riot of blossom and bloom, with the warm sun beaming down. But April here, in this grim eastern state! Sad, dirty piles of snow along the curb, and a wind that cut like a cruel word sweeping down from the hills. Billy shivered, and searched his heart for the gay confidence that had been his when he left Pacific shores. Had he been reporting his analysis he would have been forced to write, "Confidence—no trace."

He had a sort of breakfast at the leading hotel. The fried eggs were stone cold. What is more depressing than a cold fried egg? Billy went out and found what seemed to be the main residential street. A mild little citizen was approaching.

When they were opposite each other, "Say, listen!" cried Billy.

This is the usual form of address in the genial West. But as far as the mild little man was concerned, it might as well have been a bomb. He jumped violently, and nearly lost his eyeglasses. Billy Anderson was conscious of something wrong.

"I beg your pardon," he said, remembering that form of interruption from stories he had read about the effete East. "I'm looking for the house of Miss Minerva Bluebottle."

"Ah—ah—that's it—directly across," said the citizen.

He hurried on. He was flustered all day. He had been spoken to by a strange man!

Billy Anderson looked at the house on the other side of the street. He saw a stern, forbidding type of domicile, left over from another day. It was painted a serviceable but ugly dark brown. Billy crossed the street and accosted a tall lean Yankee who was sweeping the front walk.

"Work for Miss Bluebottle?" he asked the man pleasantly, offering a cigar.

"Yes," said the sweeper, suspicious of everything, cigar included.

"What's your name? What do you do?"

"Name's Carleton Webster. Been with Miss Minerva over forty years. Tend furnace in the winter and drive her carriage in the summer. Say, what you doing—taking the census?"

"No," laughed Billy. "I've just dropped in from California—to sell Miss Bluebottle an automobile."

Something flitted across Carleton Webster's sallow, jaundiced face. It must have been meant for a smile.

"Make it an aer-e-o-plane," he said. "Just as much chance."

"A tough baby, eh?" Billy inquired.

"W-what?"

"I say—she's hard to sell?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Webster. "But I kin tell you, she hates all these newfangled inventions like pizen."

“Well—of course, the automobile’s pretty recent. Hasn’t really proved itself, I imagine. Look here—no reason why you and I shouldn’t be friends. Buy yourself a box of cigars like the one I just slipped you.” He handed Carleton a ten-dollar bill.

“No,” said Carleton, shrinking back. “I can’t take it. It wouldn’t be right. An’ besides, Miss Minerva is peeking out round the parlor curtain.”

Billy Anderson looked. The curtain fell angrily into place, and in another moment the front door opened. A tall woman, dressed in black, with a fine white coiffure, stepped out on the porch. She walked like a West Point cadet, only straighter. At the edge of the porch she paused and sniffed the air through thin, aristocratic nostrils. It was evidently just the air she had expected—the clear clean air of the Berkshires, eminently satisfactory and correct. It had her approval, what more could it want?

“Carleton,” she said in a crisp cool tone, “come and look at the dining-room fire. It is smoking again.”

“Yes, ma’am,” answered Carleton, and hurried up the walk.

Once more Miss Bluebottle sniffed. Was it possible that some foreign substance was contaminating the good Berkshire air? Undoubtedly, for a strange young man stood on the sidewalk. She did not give the young man a look, but her whole attitude, as she poised there, accused her servant of an imperfect sweeping of the walk. The young man should have been gathered up with little old last year’s leaves.

Billy Anderson stared for one frightened, apprehensive second. His heart sank.

“Massachusetts—there she stands!” he muttered, and turned to find his office as local representative of the Requa car. Later that morning he wrote the first of his letters to Miss Minerva Bluebottle.

Miss Minerva found that letter by her plate the next morning when she sat down to breakfast beside the cozy fire in her dining-room. She had entered the room in quite a lively frame of mind, and had even smiled a greeting at her niece, Eloise, who was already at the table. Eloise was the only daughter of the one improvident Bluebottle, who had long ago squandered his substance in riotous Boston and passed to the great beyond. For ten years, in Miss Minerva’s household Eloise had played the part of charity child. She was a tall girl, with wistful, appealing eyes and beautiful hair. She might have been very pretty, but Miss Minerva had long ago talked her out of it.

“Only one letter—”

Miss Bluebottle took it up. The name of the Requa Automobile Company on the envelope brought a frost into her steel-gray eyes. With her lips one firm straight line, she began to read. It was rather pitiful, Billy Anderson’s attempt to inject a little romance into salesmanship in New England. She skipped, reading only the lines that seemed to leap out at her:

“Came all the way from the Coast. Want to interest you in the Requa car. Will be selling you a wonderful piece of mechanism, but not that alone. How about a little romance in your life? Selling you more than a car. Selling you the far hills when the green leaves first peep out. Selling you the vast panorama of the Lebanon Valley—the high ribbon of the Mohawk Trail, where once the Indians crept along. And the hills in autumn, all red and orange and brown—like the old-fashioned crazy quilt on your grandmother’s bed.”

At this point Miss Bluebottle gasped, and tore the letter into bits. Too bad. The last part was the best. "The poor fool!" she said fiercely. "What's the matter, Aunt Minerva?" Eloise asked. "Wants to sell me an automobile—and talks about my grandmother's bed."

"Sounds interesting," smiled Eloise. "Impertinent!" cried Miss Bluebottle.

Her niece observed that she was breathing rapidly. The cameo set amid pearls on her breast rose and fell angrily. Eloise knew it was a cameo set amid pearls, though she had never seen it. Twenty-seven years before, on the death of her mother, Minerva Bluebottle had covered her rings, her pins—all her jewelry, in fact—with crape. This crape she had never removed, just as she had never ceased to wear gowns of black. Twenty-seven years of mourning! Unbelievable—if you don't know Stonefield.

If Miss Minerva had read Billy's letter to its brilliant finish she would have learned that "our Mr. Anderson" was shortly to visit her to present his plea in person. She didn't, however, and when old Norah that evening announced a young man calling on important business she was unprepared.

"Miss Bluebottle?" Billy Anderson grasped her hand. "And this—this is your—"

"My niece, Eloise Bluebottle," said the old lady stiffly. "You have business with me?"

"I have. I imagine you got my letter this morning."

"Good heavens, the automobile man!"

"The same."

"Then let me tell you, young—"

"Let me tell you, Miss Bluebottle. Way out in California I heard about you; how you were driving round behind a couple of antediluvian horses."

"If you refer to Romulus and Remus—"

"Romulus and Remus! Are they as old as that? As I was saying, Mr. Firkins and I talked things over."

"So Henry Firkins sent you?"

"He did. The idea was to jazz things up a bit for you; to induce you to step on the gas—hit the high spots—see the world—travel—in a Requa. Of course, to be frank, I haven't as much to sell you here as I would have out in California. I take it you have seen California?"

"I have never been west of the Hudson," replied Miss Minerva proudly.

"I'm sorry for you." He looked it. "You've never lived. Oh, what I could sell you out there!—the snow-capped peaks of the Sierras instead of a string of brown little molehills."

"Sir?"

"Beg pardon—no offense. I know the Berkshires have been in your family a long time, and you're sort of fond of them. But really—if you could see some regular mountains—"

"I have seen the Swiss Alps, and I prefer our own Greylock."

"Do you?" Billy Anderson gasped. What sort of woman was this anyhow? "Well, I—I'm not here to sell you a car tonight," he went on. "I just dropped in to get acquainted."

Miss Minerva glared at him. It was related in Stonefield how an outsider, a woman, had come to town and taken the pew opposite Miss Bluebottle in church.

Six years passed, and from the Bluebottle eyes gleamed no spark of recognition. At the end of the sixth year, one morning after service, Miss Bluebottle rose and, stern with a sense of duty, approached her neighbor.

“Are you a stranger here?” she asked.

And Billy Anderson had just dropped in to get acquainted—his second night in Stonefield!

“Young man, please be good enough to let me speak,” Miss Minerva said. “You are wasting your time. I will never enter an automobile, much less purchase one.”

“May I ask why not?”

“Horses were made before motor-cars.”

“Ah, yes—and so were fingers made before forks. I haven’t had the honor of dining here—yet, but I don’t imagine you eat with your fingers—now, do you?”

“That’s quite beside the point.”

“Not at all. Miss Bluebottle, the world is moving. Move with it. Get up on the band wagon. There are a thousand advantages attached to the ownership of a car. I’m going to slip them to you, one by one.”

“I’m really sorry for you,” said Miss Bluebottle. “Henry Firkins is to blame. He has sent you on a wild-goose chase.”

“I’ll write to you,” continued Billy.

“Save your stamps.”

“I’ll call again.”

“A waste of shoe leather.”

“The next time I come I’ll tell you all about California.”

“I am not to be moved by threats.”

“In the meantime bear me in mind,” smiled Billy, rising. “I’ll take a look round and see what I’ve got to sell you—in the way of scenery, I mean. Of course, after California, it looks a little—er—a little tame here. But I understand that in the fall your hills are at their best. All red and orange and brown.”

“I forbid you,” cut in Miss Minerva sourly, “to drag in my grandmother’s bed.”

“Not at this hour,” laughed Billy. “She might be in it. Well, good night. See you soon.”

Eloise went to the door to see him safely out. They stood for a moment under the gas light in the hall—no electric wiring for Miss Minerva! Here, as in the drawing-room, hung faded portraits of dead Bluebottles, grim, haughty, uncompromising. Billy looked with keen interest into the wistful eyes of the girl.

“How long have you lived with Miss Bluebottle?” he inquired.

“Ten years,” she said softly.

“Ye gods!” He came closer. “I hope you won’t mind my saying it, but you strike me as—kind of—er—wonderful. By gad, I’d like to see you with California for a background!”

“I—I never travel,” she gasped.

“That’s all right. Once I’ve sold your aunt a Requa, you’ll travel—travel fast. Don’t ask me what I mean—I’m not sure myself. But one thing I do know—we’re going to meet again—mighty soon. Good night.”

When Eloise returned to the drawing-room her eyes were shining.

“Of all the wild young idiots!” said Miss Minerva peevishly.

“Yes,” smiled Eloise; “he—he sort of takes one’s breath away.”

“My breath is still intact,” snapped Miss Minerva.

DURING the next three weeks Miss Minerva’s breath grew, as the fellow said, even more intact. She saw that she was in for a fight, and she gloried in it. Did this flippant young whipper-snapper from the West think that he could invade her stronghold and sweep her from her feet? Not likely! She’d show him a thing or two! And in showing him, she would express her contempt for the entire territory west of the Massachusetts state line.

As for Billy Anderson, before coming to Stonefield he had regarded the town as a myth of Mr. Firkins’ imagination. Such a place as the Boston man described could hardly exist at this late day. Now, however, he had seen Stonefield, and knew that Mr. Firkins had not told him the half of it. He was amazed, appalled. Each day brought him some new story of the intolerance, the stubbornness of the older generation. There was, for example, Miss Minerva’s friend, Miss Anna Bell Small. Anna Bell had sworn that if the city council ran the trolleys along the street before her house she would never again step out of her front door. For seventeen years she had been coming and going the back way, and still she showed no signs of weakening.

Each night Billy sat in his room reading the latest breezy books on the art of salesmanship. Good enough books in their way, but their authors had not written them with Minerva Bluebottle in mind. Billy would sigh and falter. But in the morning he would rise with renewed energy, keen to resume his attack on the immovable body. He tried letters—one a day—each setting forth a separate golden advantage attached to the ownership of a car—preferably a Requa. He telephoned. He waylaid Miss Bluebottle on the street. Water, it is understood, rolls harmlessly from a duck’s back. Miss Minerva gave him frequent reason to recall the simile.

Now and then he ran across Eloise Bluebottle—on the street, once at a dance, once at a church social, whither he had gone with just such an adventure in mind. Yes, he decided, the girl was beautiful, in a vague, spiritual sort of way, so different from the hearty maidens of California. She was a new type; she appealed to him. But the poor thing was asleep—had never been anything else. What she needed was to be roused, carried away from this narrow town, given a new setting wherein she would wake and glow and live. At the end of the church social, by sort of obliterating a pale young man with eye-glasses, Billy managed to walk home with her.

“How do you like Stonefield by this time?” she asked.

“Sort of a nearsighted town,” he said. “I’m introduced to people one day, and they seem cordial enough. The next day I meet them on the street, and when I speak to them they jump and look at me in terror—the frightened-fawn stuff. I’m not used to it.”

“They regard you as a stranger,” she told him. “After you’ve lived here ten years—”

“Ten years!” cried Billy. “No, thanks, not for me—and not necessary either. Why, Jacob only served seven for Rachel.”

He heard her laugh softly.

"I was thinking," she explained, "of Aunt Minerva playing Rachel to your Jacob. She would be flattered! I'm sorry," she went on more seriously, "but you'll never win her in seven years. Or seventy times seven."

"Oh, I don't know. All I have to do is get her into a Requa car—just once. Then if she has any sporting blood—and I'll say she has—she's sold."

"But how are you going to get her into a car?" There was a certain eagerness in the girl's voice.

"Watch your Uncle Billy," advised Anderson mysteriously. But he said good night with a rather doubtful eye on the curtains of the stern brown house.

Billy based his request that Uncle Billy be kept under observation on the fact that he had yet to play his trump card. He was not relying entirely on the United States mail and the telephone company. No one does these days.

One evening soon after his arrival in Stonefield he had met Carleton Webster on the street and, steering him into the Requa office, had handed him another cigar and asked, "How would you like to learn to run an automobile?"

"What would Miss Minerva say?" Mr. Webster was doubtful.

"What could she say? Your evenings are your own, aren't they?"

"I reckon so."

"To do with as you please?"

"I ain't never heard no different."

"Well, I'll take you out and teach you—free gratis. What do you say?"

"I've sort of had the hankering," admitted Mr. Webster, rolling the cigar between his lips. "Had to turn out for so many devil wagons in my day I've often wished I was on one myself. Yes, sir, as I drove round behind Romulus and Remus there's been times I felt I'd like more power—more power," he added with emphasis.

"Fine!" cried Billy. "Come with me! No time like little old now."

When Mr. Webster had mastered the driving of a Requa, Billy arranged for his big experiment. Each afternoon at two-thirty it was understood that Carleton was to appear before Miss Minerva's door with his horses hitched and ready. Followed the gentle jog through the town that was Miss Bluebottle's daily taking of the air—a religious rite observed by the Brahman caste in Stonefield since the beginning of time.

On a certain sunny May afternoon Carleton drove up before the Bluebottle door. He had on his ancient silk hat, his blue coat with the brass buttons. But he flourished no whip. He had nothing to flourish it over. He was sitting behind the wheel of a bright and shining Requa.

Billy Anderson leaped from the seat at Carleton's side and ran up the walk. Norah answered his ring.

"Tell Miss Bluebottle her carriage is waiting," said Billy.

A moment later Miss Minerva stepped grandly from her door. She looked toward the curb—and gasped. Billy Anderson had sort of shivered back against the wall, his confidence oozing. Miss Minerva turned and her flashing eye met his guilty one.

"What's this?" she snapped.

"A little variation in your daily routine," said Billy. "I planned it for you. I want you to step inside and sink back amid the soft luxury of—"

“Young man, I don’t believe you realize how impertinent you are. Out in the wild country where you were unfortunately born this sort of thing may be lightly regarded, but not here.”

“Miss Bluebottle, you don’t understand. I’m trying to brighten your life.”

“You’re a young idiot! When I told you I would not ride in one of those smelly things—”

“Smelly? Of roses, Miss Bluebottle. See? I filled the vase for you.”

“—I was not talking to exercise my tongue. I meant it!”

“But be fair! Give it a trial!”

“No! I regard it as a rattly, death-dealing abomination.”

“Rattly! Why listen to that engine! Purrs like a kitten.”

“I hate cats.”

“But I thought—”

“You thought all old maids liked them. I don’t! Carleton, come here!”

Thoroughly frightened, Carleton extracted his person from behind the wheel.

“Carleton, what does this mean? Am I to understand that you have learned to operate that vile contraption?”

“Yes, Miss Minerva.” Carleton tried the other foot. “I learned nights, my time off. And—I wish you’d try a ride, Miss Minerva. A short one. It’s—it’s fine. When I step on the exhilarator—”

“On the what?”

“The exhilarator,” repeated Carleton, who had so christened it. “The thing that gives her the gas. When I step on that the good old Berkshire air jest sweeps over you an’—an’—it’s fine.”

“You poor old fool!” said Miss Minerva. “Now run to the barn and hitch up Romulus and Remus as fast as the Lord will let you. I shall be late for my drive. I’m not accustomed to being late.”

“Y—yes, ma’am,” said Carleton.

“I rely on you, young man”—Miss Minerva turned to the gloomy Billy—“to remove that—that thing—from before my door. And what can I say to convince you? I will not buy a car. I will not ride in a car. Can you grasp that, or is the English language unknown in the rough region that sent you forth?”

“I understand, Miss Bluebottle,” said Billy. “I had no wish to be impertinent.”

“Then I shudder to think what you would do if you had.”

“But I’m a salesman, and I naturally want to sell. My idea was to show you how nice and comfortable you’d be, riding in a Requa. I thought that perhaps, with your own coachman driving, you might take a chance. It was only an experiment. There’s nothing more to be said.”

“I fancy not. Good day.”

Billy Anderson went down the walk to his car. From a rear view he looked so unhappy and squelched that Eloise, at an upstairs window, pitied him. When he turned to enter the car she caught his eye and daring greatly, waved. He gravely lifted his hat and drove off. Miss Minerva’s expression, as he had last seen it, reminded him that New England had furnished the inspiration for Hawthorne’s story, *The Great Stone Face*.

IN his room that night Billy Anderson admitted his defeat. Out in the broad free West he had been a riot, but here in this conservative town he was a frost. His genial, handshaking, back-slapping methods frightened the good people to death. They resented his easy manner, and in Miss Bluebottle's case particularly, his campaign had been ill advised, doomed to failure from the start. But, hang it all, it was the only style of attack he knew!

Henry G. Firkins had written that he would be along in another ten days. Billy had been working on Stonefield six weeks, and what had he to show for it? A few sales to summer visitors, to factory managers; sales any one could have made. The East, thought Billy bitterly, was no place for him. He would have to confess himself beaten and hand Firkins his resignation.

During the next few days he concentrated on the other old families of the town. He sought to make his attack dignified. It seemed to him that some of them were interested, but he got no further. As for Miss Minerva Bluebottle, he let her severely alone.

On the twenty-ninth day of May, about three-thirty in the afternoon, Billy's telephone rang. The voice of Carleton Webster came over the wire.

"Say, listen!" Carleton had picked up that phrase along with the ability to run a car. "I'm out here at Cal Morton's farm, on the Eastlake pike. Miss Bluebottle's carriage has busted—rear axle just crumpled up. She's settin' in it, waitin'. Ordered me to call up Peter McQuade—he's got the only horse and carriage for rent in town. I called him, but I thought I'd tip you off too. You can beat him out here easy if you start now. Don't know as there's much use tryin' it, but—"

"Thanks, Carleton," said Billy, and hung up. A little of his old-time enthusiasm returned. Now or never, he thought.

In twenty minutes he drew up beside Miss Minerva's tipsy carriage. One side was in the ditch, and the seat slanted at an angle of about forty-five degrees. Only Miss Bluebottle could have sat with dignity under the circumstances. She managed it—with ease.

"Say, this is fortunate!" cried Billy, leaping from his car.

"I'm not surprised to see you," snapped the old lady. "Been following me, no doubt, waiting for that axle to break. Probably got into my barn last night and tampered with it!"

"Nonsense! You don't think as badly of me as that?"

"Yes, I do!"

"I meant, it was fortunate I happened along. Just step into my car and I'll whisk you home in no time."

"I have no desire to be whisked, thank you." A loud peal of thunder grumbled suddenly among the hills.

"It's going to rain," said Billy.

"Let it!" said Miss Minerva. She was in a rather bad temper.

"But I'd be delighted to give you a lift."

"I know you would. But you'll not get the chance. We have telephoned for Peter McQuade."

"He can't get here for half an hour," said Billy, "and it may be raining then. Thunder—and lightning—"

"Precisely! No time to be riding in one of those electrical contrivances."

“But the Requa isn’t run by electricity. It’s run by gasoline. Isn’t it, Carleton?”

“Sure!” said Carleton.

“It’s run by the devil, if you ask me,” said Miss Minerva. “I don’t know how you got here so promptly, but I have my suspicions. And it’s not going to do you any good. Here I sit until Peter McQuade comes—all night if necessary.”

“You stubborn, bitter, intolerant old woman,” said Billy Anderson hotly—to himself. “Sit here and drown, for all I care. You should have died fifty years ago anyhow.”

“I dare say,” remarked Miss Minerva, “that all you are thinking about me is true. Now get into your car and hurry home before the rain comes and washes off all the nice brown paint.”

This was, of course, a deadly insult, and she had hit upon it instinctively. Carleton Webster made a gesture of mute despair behind her back. Billy turned and reentered his machine.

“Ah, yes,” the old lady called as he turned about, “I notice you’re going back the same way you came. Carleton!”

“Y-yes, ma’am,” stammered Carleton.

“Did you call Peter McQuade, or didn’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I hope for your sake you did,” she told him grimly.

When Billy Anderson was about a mile down the road the rain began to fall. Somehow it soothed his ruffled feelings. A little farther along he turned out for Peter McQuade, hurrying on through the storm.

That evening Billy met Eloise Bluebottle on her way home from the library. She had a pile of books under her arm.

“Let me carry them,” Billy suggested.

“If you don’t mind. They’re rather heavy. For my aunt, you know.”

“Ah, yes, your aunt. I hope she didn’t get very wet this afternoon.”

“Not very. I heard all about it. And I’m sorry—really I am. Do you mind if I say something?”

“I’d love it.”

“You’ll never sell my aunt a car. Your methods are wrong—you’ll pardon my frankness, won’t you?”

“Of course. As a matter of fact, I came to the same decision some time ago. But they’re the only methods I know. I was thinking it all out the other night. People here are different from what they are on the Coast. When I was in Honolulu I had a chance to go to China and sell cars. If I had gone I’d have had to learn an entirely new system—and that’s what I should have done when I came here. For these people are as unlike those I’ve been dealing with as—as Chinese. Dog-gone it, they are Chinese! Living in the past—worshipping their ancestors! How long has your aunt worn crape on her rings?”

“Twenty-seven years,” said Eloise.

“That’s the point. I’ve tried the wrong tack—and I’ve failed. I’m licked—through. When Mr. Firkins comes next week I intend to resign.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” said the girl.

“Are you? Well, it helps a lot—to have you say that. By the way, to-morrow’s a holiday—Decoration Day. How about taking a ride with me? We’ll go somewhere for lunch—”

“Oh, I couldn’t!” said Eloise timidly, wistfully even. “Aunt Minerva wouldn’t like it. Besides, I must go with her in the morning—to the cemetery.”

“The what?”

“The cemetery. It’s a sacred rite with her. She decorates all the Bluebottle graves.”

“She does, eh?” said Billy. He was silent for a moment. “I don’t suppose anything could persuade her from going?”

“I should say not! A few years ago she rose from a sick bed to attend to it—and got pneumonia and nearly died. It’s—well, it’s one of the things she will look after herself as long as she has breath in her body. Everybody who is anybody in Stonefield will be out there in the morning. Afterward they have a little social hour amid the tombstones. You ought to see it! I suppose it’s quite different from the West.”

“I should say so!” smiled Billy gently. “Out West we’re not much concerned with the past. It’s the present—and the star-spangled future we think of. By the way, how far is it to the cemetery?”

“Oh, about four miles.”

“How will your aunt get there? Her carriage is out of commission.”

“She’s ordered Peter McQuade to call for her at eight-thirty.”

“Oh, she has, has she?” They stopped before the cheerless house. “Say—listen—I mean, can I depend on you to back me up?”

“I—I think so. What are you talking about?”

“Chinese—ancestor worshipers. I’ve just had a sign from heaven. I’m to be given one last chance. And—it’s great of you to say you’ll help me.” He seized her hand. “I said that first night I saw you that you were—wonderful. After I’ve sold Aunt Minerva that Requa I’ll have something to sell you.”

“What?” Very softly.

“God’s country—California! The roar of the surf below Monterey! San Juan Capistrano in the moonlight! The silent, snowy tops of the Sierras!”

She got her hand free then, and seizing the books ran quickly from him up the walk. Billy Anderson returned to his room, and before retiring made certain arrangements with his alarm clock. He set it for the hour of six on Decoration Day.

AT six-thirty the next morning Billy Anderson stood in Peter McQuade’s back yard in solemn conference with the owner of the only horse-drawn vehicle for rent in Stonefield. Mr. McQuade was in the throes of his morning grouch; he did not yield readily to arguments. A twenty-dollar bill, however, soothed his soul and brightened his whole day.

Fifteen minutes later Ma McQuade locked the front door and climbed to the side of her husband in the ancient carriage. Mr. McQuade took up the reins, then leaned forward doubtfully.

“You’ve give me your word,” he said, “that you’ll fix things with Miss Minerva.”

“Don’t give her another thought,” smiled Billy. “So long!”

“Ge-ap!” said Mr. McQuade.

Mr. Anderson watched them drive off, to perform an entirely unnecessary errand for him in a town ten miles distant.

"It's to-day or never," he reflected grimly as he went back to his boarding-house for breakfast.

At twenty-two minutes before nine Billy Anderson drove a bright new Requa limousine up to Miss Minerva's front door. He left the car sparkling in the first warm sunshine of the spring and hurried up the walk. On the veranda he noted a collection of lilacs, snowballs, syringas, a few anemic geraniums in pots, roses and carnations from the local greenhouse. He thought of California in May and smiled a pitying smile. Eloise met him at the door.

"I'm glad you've come," she said. "Aunt Minerva is in a state! Walking the floor! I never saw her so upset before."

"What's the trouble?"

"Peter McQuade! He hasn't shown up, and no one will answer his telephone." She preceded Billy into the dim drawing-room. "Auntie, here's Mr. Anderson."

"I've trouble enough without Mr. Anderson," snapped the old lady.

"Perhaps I can help you in your trouble," said Billy gently.

"You could—if you owned a horse."

"I own sixty of them—in the form of a beautiful, smooth-running Requa. I understand you wish to go to the cemetery."

"Aha—another conspiracy!" cried Miss Bluebottle fiercely.

"Now—now!" rebuked Billy in an injured tone. "That's unworthy of you—on this lovely morning, when your only thoughts should be of these fine people on the wall." He glanced about him at the Bluebottles who had been. "I think you've hurt their feelings," he went on. "They look hurt to me."

"Eloise," said the old lady, "did you call up Mrs. Eldridge?"

"Yes, Auntie, I told you I called them all—the Eldridges, the Smalls, the Clarksons—all down the list. Everybody has started—they're somewhere on the way."

Miss Bluebottle groaned. Then silence.

"Miss Bluebottle," said Billy in a moment, "is this the proper morning to parade your foolish prejudice against automobiles? Think! You have not missed a Decoration Day morning up there for twenty years!"

"Twenty-seven!"

"For twenty-seven years! In a few minutes all your friends—all the best people—will be gathered there, doing honor to their ancestors. They will glance toward the Bluebottle plot—sad, neglected, untouched. What will people say?"

"You're right!" she cried. "Eloise, call—call me a taxi."

Eloise paused. Billy nodded and winked.

"Call her a taxi," he said. Eloise disappeared. "But I don't approve of it. Taxis are rattly, they are smelly—germs, Miss Bluebottle!"

"Germs?" sniffed Miss Bluebottle. "Not up here in our fine clean Berkshires."

"Ah, yes—even up here. For strangers will drift in, and they bring germs with them. Now my car is new, clean, with lots of room for those beautiful geraniums and what-you-may-call-'ems."

"The taxi man does not answer," announced Eloise, returning. Again Miss Minerva groaned.

"I'm not going to say a word," remarked Billy. "I'm going to let them speak for me." He waved his hand toward the Bluebottles on the wall. "A fine, intelligent-looking crowd, and good sports too. That old chap there—Uncle Ezra, I presume—"

"My father, Hezekiah Bluebottle," corrected the old lady.

"Ah, yes! Look at the twinkle in his eye! I'll bet he ran over to Albany now and then! He's watching you, Miss Bluebottle. He's wondering what you're going to do. They're all wondering. You've got a sort of a date with them this morning. Do you imagine you're justified in passing them up—disappointing them—just for the selfish satisfaction of keeping a silly vow? I don't! They won't! Stop and ask yourself, Miss Bluebottle—doesn't the end justify the means?"

He stopped. A long pause followed.

"Norah," called Miss Minerva suddenly, "bring my hat and coat!"

Billy Anderson said nothing. He ran outside and began placing flowers in the limousine. As he helped Miss Bluebottle in she gave him a withering look over her shoulder.

"Remember this!" she said. "I'll never own one of these things! Never! Never!"

"In you go," smiled Billy. "I'll have you there in a jiffy."

He started his motor, and Miss Bluebottle went to her tryst with the past—at forty miles an hour. Her arrival at the cemetery was the sensation of the decade in Stonefield. But she carried it off with her usual grand air.

Eloise helped her as she busied herself above the graves of Bluebottles, long dust. When the social hour began the girl came over and joined Billy Anderson, who was cheerfully lurking near a marble angel.

"One thing I want to ask you," he said. "How did it happen the taxi man failed to answer?"

"Perhaps"—she blushed—"perhaps it was because he never got a chance. I didn't call him."

"Hooray!" cried Billy. "You do like me then? You want me to win out?"

"Yes, I—I think I do."

"That's all I wanted to know. Now that I've practically sold your aunt—"

"But you haven't!"

"All in good time. I want to tell you—I want to say"—his usually glib tongue found the roof of his mouth and stuck there. He tried again—"It's you that's kept me here. More than once I was ready to give up—to go away. Then I thought of you—that look in your eyes—"

"Please!"

"Let me finish—if I can. I want—I want " He turned helplessly, and his eyes fell on the inscription beneath the marble angel. He pointed. "What I mean is, how would it look—carved in stone—a great many years from now, of course—Eloise, beloved wife of Billy Anderson?"

He stopped, for she was staring at him.

"Oh, dog-gone it," he cried, "I'm all wrong! I'm talking like—like they do out here—this town has got me. But you understand—you would be beloved—all through the years—if you married me. Will you?"

"Aunt Minerva would be furious. She—she couldn't hear of it!"

"Forget Aunt Minerva," began Billy, but it proved impossible, for the old lady joined them at that moment.

The social hour was over. She had found, somewhat to her consternation, that all her friends took it for granted she had purchased the glittering car. She did not point out their error. It was none of their business anyhow.

Billy Anderson helped her back into the machine. Out on the main highway he called over his shoulder, "I'm going to take you home by a roundabout route."

Miss Bluebottle uttered some protesting remark, but already they were traveling at such a rate of speed that it did not leap forward to the driver's seat.

Had she realized how roundabout the route was to be her protest would have been stronger. Billy whisked her along between newly green fields, up and down her beloved hills. For a time she raged and demanded to be allowed to walk. Then she sat back, filling her lungs with the fine, clear air she worshiped as the heathen once worshiped the sun. A faint flush came into her cheeks. Three hours passed, and Billy drew up before a country inn.

"I'm about to invite you to lunch," he announced.

"Lunch!" cried Miss Minerva. "Why, I must be home—"

"You're a hundred miles from home," he laughed.

"Kidnaper!" she cried.

But there was the ghost of a smile on her face, and as she alighted he saw that her eyes were shining. After lunch he took them back to Stonefield—again by a roundabout way. Dusk was falling when he drew up before their door.

"Home!" said Miss Minerva. "I never expected to see it again, I'm sure." She got out of the car, her cheeks still flushed, the light still in her eyes. "Won't you have supper with us?" she invited.

Delighted, Billy followed the two women inside. Waiting in the drawing-room, he bethought himself of sales talk. Miss Minerva was the first to return.

"Well," said Billy, "I guess I've shown you the difference between Romulus and Remus, and a Requa. You see now what I mean when I say that when I sell you a car I sell you more than a piece of mechanism. I sell you the western half of this great state for your playground—the farthest and the highest hills, quaint little public squares where history was made, noble Grey-lock, Jacob's Ladder, round after round of verdant beauty. I sell you romance and revel."

"I'm pretty old," sighed Miss Minerva, "for romance and revel."

"Old! You wouldn't say that if you knew how young you look after your ride. Why, you look about twenty-five, and you can always look that way if you'll only jazz things up—get out and enjoy life. Here we are," he went on solemnly, "in the presence of all these splendid Bluebottles, dead and gone. Before them you can't be anything but honest with yourself—with me. You had a mighty good time to-day—now, didn't you?"

The firelight flickered on the portraits. The aged clock ticked youthfully.

"What I want," said Miss Minerva in a firm clear voice, "is a car exactly like the one we rode in to-day!"

Billy Anderson's heart stopped beating.

"You can have that one," he said softly, so as not to break the spell. "It was never off the floor until this morning." He took an order blank from his pocket. "Sign here," he said.

When she had signed and written a check she handed both to Billy. He bowed in a manner that took in most of the people on the wall.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I thank you.” Eloise entered. “I’ve sold your aunt that car,” he announced. “And oh, by the way, Miss Bluebottle—there’s one thing more. Eloise and I are going to be married.”

They waited for the explosion.

“It’s a good idea,” said the surprising old woman. “I’ve thought so for some time. We New Englanders intermarry altogether too much. The families peter out. We need new enthusiasm, new life.” She unlocked a drawer of her desk and took out a worn old box.

Opening it, she held it before the astonished Billy. “I’ve been saving them for Eloise’s husband. My father’s cigars—just as he left them when he passed on at the time of the Civil War.”

Billy took one of the cigars gingerly in his fingers. It crumbled immediately into a dry brown dust.

“War quality,” he said softly. “They don’t hold up.”

More than a year later Miss Bluebottle was out riding in her limousine with her friend, Mrs. Eldridge.

“Yes,” she said, “they’ve gone to California to live. I advised it. Billy was doing well in Boston, but he can get along even faster among his own people—and as for Eloise, the mild climate has made a new woman of her. I had a telegram yesterday. The baby weighed twelve pounds at birth—that is, when it arrived.”

“Twelve pounds!” repeated Mrs. Eldridge.

“We don’t grow them like that here, do we?” Miss Minerva tried to keep vulgar boasting from her tone. “You know, I’ve come to believe that California is a great state.”

“But so different from Massachusetts,” said her friend smugly.

“Well, a change does us all good. I’ve made up my mind to go out there this winter and visit them.”

“Why, Minerva,” protested Mrs. Eldridge, “it’s a frightful trip! You’ll be days in smelly germey Pullmans.”

“Nonsense!” Miss Bluebottle snapped. “I may be an old woman, but I’m down off the shelf, and down to stay. I agree with Billy—it’s never too late to jazz things up.”

“Jazz things up? Minerva Bluebottle, what in heaven’s name does that mean?”

“I’ll show you,” said Miss Bluebottle. She leaned forward. “Carleton,” she ordered, “give her the gas. Step on the exhilarator.”

Carleton stepped on it.

